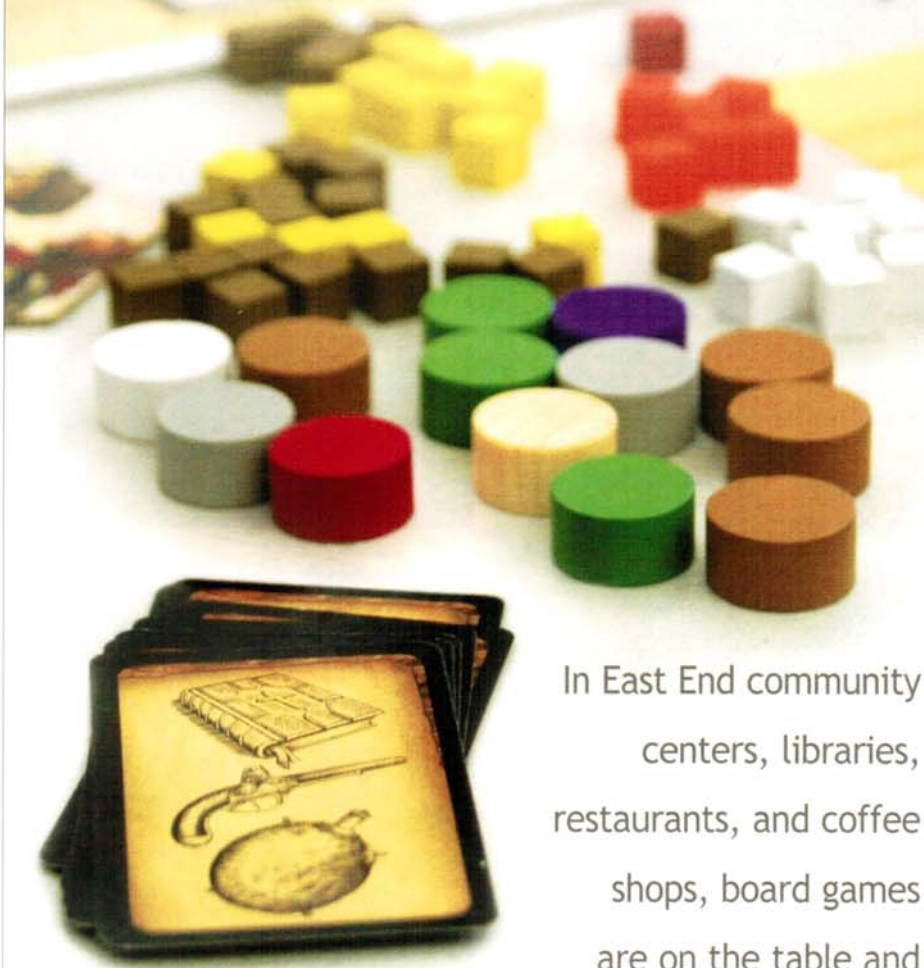


# GAMES

## People Play



In East End community centers, libraries, restaurants, and coffee shops, board games are on the table and bringing people together.

BY HILARY DANINHIRSCH

If you think board games are a relic of the past, think again. Despite the prevalence of online gaming and electronic communication, people throughout our area are regularly meeting face to face in competitive play the old-school way.

Logophiles (word lovers) gather each Wednesday evening at Panera restaurant on the Boulevard of the Allies in Oakland to play Scrabble, the crossword game that has been a staple in American homes for three-

quarters of a century. But living-room players beware: words like "cat" won't cut it in this game, not even on a triple-word score. Meetings are hosted by the Pittsburgh Scrabble Club, an affiliate of the National Organization of Scrabble Players, and participants engage in serious Scrabble, tournament style.

Games are limited to two players, each of whom has a total of 25 minutes to complete all turns. Because of the accelerated pace, players are able to complete up to three games per evening.



A board in play during a meeting of the Pittsburgh Scrabble Club.

Certified director Dorcas Alexander acknowledges that new people often find the gatherings intimidating, even those who consider themselves to be well qualified. "We are competitive, but it's not cutthroat," says Alexander, who is a top-ranked player. "We really want people who are going to be intrigued by the combination of loving words and making it into a competitive thing ... [but] we laugh and joke during games, which we wouldn't do in a real tournament setting."

Alexander says that the demographics of the group are "all over the place," both in age and geography. She has 75 people on her mailing list, but meetings generally consist of about 20 regulars.

Fox Chapel resident Thomas Chang is one of those regulars. Having played the "kitchen" version of the game with his family for many years, Chang became intrigued with tournament-style Scrabble after a friend gave him a copy of *Word Freak: Heartbreak, Triumph, Genius and Obsession in the World of Competitive Scrabble Players* by Stefan Fatsis. Coincidentally, Chang lost his first tournament game to Fatsis's 10-year-old daughter.

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*People Play*

“It is very strategic—that’s what drew me to the game,” says Chang, who spoke to *Shady Ave* while driving to a Scrabble tournament in Rochester. He also enjoys learning new and unusual words. If there’s a downside to the world of Scrabble for Chang, it’s that his wife won’t play with him anymore, saying that he’s now “out of her league.”

Although both Chang and Alexander are (to use Fatsis’s term) “at one with the board,” they both allow that online games, such as Words With Friends, can help further players’ skills, especially learning those crucial, high-scoring, two- and three-letter words.

But virtual play can’t replace a real-world presence. Meeting at Panera provides the club with an opportunity to attract new members. “It’s a way of becoming more visible in the community,” Chang says.

Panera manager Brittany Spencer gladly welcomes the lively group of Scrabble players, as well as other groups that meet at the restaurant. “We like the familiarity,” she says. “It’s nice knowing that the same people will be in regularly.”

That feeling is shared by Mark Kerecz, a barista at Crazy Mocha Coffee Company on Murray Avenue in Squirrel Hill, which hosts Pittsburgh Eurogames on Sunday afternoons and Wednesday evenings. The gamers “provide good energy for the business,” he says.



Thomas Chang of Fox Chapel is engrossed in a Scrabble game during a weekly meeting of the Pittsburgh Scrabble Club.



# GAMES

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Fans of Eurogames meet twice weekly at Crazy Mocha coffee shop in Squirrel Hill.

Eurogames—which originated in Europe, as the name suggests—differ from American games in several key ways, notes Kylie Prymus, manager (and soon to be owner) of Games Unlimited, located across the street from Crazy Mocha. Unlike American games, in which players frequently get eliminated, everyone plays until the end in popular games such as Carcassonne, Ticket to Ride, and Settlers of Catan. Also, Prymus explains, “American-style games tend to be zero-sum games—I have to take things from you, I’ve bankrupted you—while in European games I can get ahead without beating you down.”

Trending over the past five years have been cooperative games, Prymus says. “These are games in which everyone is working together to beat the game, so there is not one winner and a bunch of losers. Everyone wins or everyone loses.”

Games Unlimited’s customer base is largely people in their 20s and 30s, but folks in middle age and older are rediscovering a love of the pastime through board games that are kinder and gentler than many of those they knew in childhood, like that trio of diversions suggesting distress: Sorry, Trouble, and Aggravation.

Shadyside native Trudy Gray, who fondly remembers bonding with her father over board games when she was a kid, leads the Eurogames group in Squirrel Hill. She says the atmosphere is competitive, but friendly and welcoming, too. “I’m kind of mother



Gamers gathered around a table at the East Liberty branch of the Carnegie Library are engaged in the role-playing game Robinson Crusoe.

hen,” Gray admits. “I really care about the people and I want everyone to have a good time.”

Another Eurogames group in East Liberty is built on the same premise. Known as Table Top Gaming, the culturally and generationally diverse group plays all day on the first Saturday of each month at the neighborhood branch of the Carnegie Library on Whitfield Street. The group was started by Tessa Barber, the adult and teen services librarian, through a program that seeks to connect library users with others who share their interests, from books to brewing to board games. “I felt like [this] was something that...would have an audience in the community and bring people together,” says Barber. “We want to do programming that is fun and nontraditional, and make people think ‘maybe I should get a library card.’”

“The library, in my opinion, is essential to community-building,” Barber continues.

“We think of it as a third space—not home, not school, but this other place to hang out that is free—where people can gather and learn.”

There are other “third spaces” in the East End where board game enthusiasts gather. The Union Project, a Highland Park community center, hosts a community game night on the third Wednesday of each month, and board game nights take place intermittently at TechShop in Bakery Square.

The Table Top gamers, like those in Pittsburgh Eurogames and the Scrabble club, also enjoy various forms of electronic entertainment, including video and computer games. But there’s just no substitute for human interaction. As “mother hen” Gray notes, what ultimately draws players to these community events is the fact that “people miss people,” and the game of life cannot be played—or enjoyed—without them. SA